

*Betsy Taylor, Associated Press (The St. Louis Post Dispatch)*

ST. LOUIS (AP) -- The flood protection system separating St. Louis from the Mississippi River needs repair, and Missouri officials are calling for prompt federal assistance to fund the fixes.

U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan and St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay held a news conference on the riverfront today to say the federal government needs to act soon to safeguard more than 3,000 acres protected by the system.

After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, and the extensive damage to the St. Louis region during the Great Flood of 1993, it's high time to improve the city's flood protection system, the two Democrats said.

"The key is to get started and address some of the deficiencies," Carnahan said.

In 2005, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers warned that the St. Louis floodwall could succumb during a catastrophic flood. A corps report determined that a flood as severe as the Great Flood of 1993 would create more than a 90 percent probability of some failure along St. Louis' roughly 11-mile system of floodwalls and earthen levees.

The corps estimated at the time that it would cost \$15.6 million to fix the levee and the project would take about five years. The federal government would pay about two-thirds of the cost, with the city paying the rest.

Repairs that need to be done include replacing more than 100 relief wells and installing about 70 new ones. The wells can carry built-up water away from flood walls and levees to protect their integrity.

Also, more than 30 gates through the floodwall where roads and rail lines pass through are made of thin metal, and half are in degraded condition. Twenty need to be replaced and concrete used to seal over gates permanently not in use.

"The study found that a catastrophic failure would put billions of dollars of property and thousands of lives in jeopardy," Slay wrote to the Assistant Secretary of the Army, John Woodley Jr., on May 27.

Missouri's U.S. senators and representatives also sent Woodley a letter on the issue last month.

St. Louis set aside its local match two years ago as part of a bond issue. If that money is not spent on the flood protection project, it will become unavailable by the end of this year, Carnahan said.

"The federal government's indecision could also cost us our local match," Slay said.

They are seeking funds in the 2008 Army Corps of Engineers budget toward the work, and an amendment to the Water Resources Development Act that would allow St. Louis to begin spending the local money now for the project, even if federal dollars aren't included in the next budget. It would still be counted as St. Louis' match toward the project when federal funds are contributed, Slay said.

Most of St. Louis rises uphill from the river, and downtown St. Louis is not in a flood plain. The biggest concern would be for commercial and industrial areas north and south of downtown.

The St. Louis floodwall was designed about 50 years ago and built in 1963 and 1964 to protect against a flood expected to happen once every 500 years.

"The floodwall served well in '93. There's good reason to believe it would serve well again. But the issue is, the floodwall was heavily assaulted in 1993, and 1995 was not an inconsequential

flood, either. Those structures like those gates, once you get corrosion started, it doesn't stop," said Alan Dooley, public affairs officer for the Army Corps of Engineers office in St. Louis.

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Associated Press Writer Jim Salter in St. Louis contributed to this report.

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